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WHITMAN AND ANNE GILCHRIST

BY EDITH WYATT

THERE are certain phrases that haunt the memory like a bar of music: and, long after their notes are still, continue to paint the dream of a way of life upon the reader's imagination. Such a phrase occurs in Herbert Gilchrist's distinguished biography of his mother in a letter to her written by Samuel Palmer: "How often I think of your sweet house on the L'Allegro Upland among the green hills."

A natural dweller on L'Allegro Uplands, Anne Gilchrist has of late attracted public attention as the writer of those recently published letters of hers which express in part the episode of her passionate friendship for Walt Whitman—from the hour when the first notes of the Mystic Trumpeter sounded across the sea to her from the page of Rossetti's edition of his poetry, to the sorrowful day when Whitman wrote to her son:

I have received your letter. Nothing now remains but a sweet and rich memory—none more beautiful all time, all life, all the earth—I cannot write anything of a letter to-day. I must sit alone and think.

One says that these letters express this episode in part; for although they blaze the trail for a long distance, they lead the reader finally into the trackless forest of conjecture.

Anne Gilchrist had the gift of a genius of character such as harmonized outward circumstance: so that to walk over the bright and cloud-dappled country of her earthly journey, to read the pages that tell us of her existence, in her son's *Life of his mother*, in her sincere and charming contributions to English criticism and biography, in her letters to Whitman and his to her, and in her American sketches, is like reading an original musical composition, but a composition which is incomplete, and does not contain the notation of all the movements the creator had in his soul.

From Anne Gilchrist's early years one may observe certain likenesses between her spiritual outlook and Whitman's.

A child of the English gentry, the daughter of a London physician, she belonged from the beginning in the ranks of the lovers of "sober-suited freedom." Her idea of religious conduct was, as she says, that of leading "a brave and loving life." At eighteen, in her thoughtful girlhood on her mother's small estate in the Priory at Colne, she writes serenely to her friend, Julia Newton, who is troubled with questions of sectarian faith:

I cannot help thinking you attach too much importance to creeds and doctrines. They are mere definitions after all: and definitions are better calculated to circumscribe truth, and bring it down to the narrow level of our half-awakened understandings, than to raise our minds to deep, devoted, life-giving comprehension of it.

Here indeed is a mental kinship with the poet then unknown to her who mentions it as a merit that he has "argued not concerning God": and tells us that "no array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God."

Anne Gilchrist is like Whitman, too, in her capacity for varied happiness. Married at twenty-three to Alexander Gilchrist, she writes to her confidante, Julia:

Your friend is very happy, for she loves and is beloved by one who can fulfill her aspirations, realize her ideal of a true marriage, one who is her friend and helper, as well as her lover—I know not how to describe him to you, dear Julia, except by telling you that he is altogether, both in intellect and heart, great, noble and beautiful.

She enjoys trying to teach Jeannie Welsh Carlyle how to knead bread; she enjoys rambling through England helping to collect material for her husband's *Life of Etty*; she enjoys the Rossettis; she enjoys Samuel Palmer, the inimitable friend of Blake; she enjoys Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job; and writing an article on "Whales and Whalemen" for *Chambers' Magazine*; and taking care of her husband and children.

Widowed at thirty-three, with two little sons and two little daughters to care for on a tiny income, Anne Gilchrist looked back on ten years of hard work, of small means, a decade of married life rich in friendships, in happy memories, in a wonderful stimulation of her powers of appreciation.

Mrs. Gilchrist lived in the house she had taken at

Brookbank on Palmer's L'Allegro Upland. The fragrance of honey-suckle blew about it. It was covered with white clematis, and filled with the lovely carved furniture collected by her taste and her husband's, in spite of their small means. A Joshua Reynolds, that George Eliot said she wanted to steal, hung over her fireplace. She possessed Blake's magnificent "Elijah in the Fiery Chariot." Connoisseurs speak of her "enriched walls." The cottage was on the Portsmouth Road, "upon a wide and spacious tract of downs, with every variety of little hill and plain to change their verdant surface."

Here Mrs. Gilchrist walked with Tennyson (she was a capital walker, making nothing of sixteen miles a day) and chose a house for him, and entertained Christina Rossetti and read Jean Ingelow and Fredericka Bremer, and brought up her children.

It was here at Brookbank, with its lovely interior in this place of sweeping downs and long walks and Tennysonian comment, that she read Rossetti's edition of Whitman's poems, presented to her by Madox-Brown. She says that since she has had the book she can read no other; that it holds her entirely spellbound, and that she goes through it again and again with deepening wonder.

It is not surprising that William Rossetti and Anne Gilchrist, who had known so deeply the intense democratic mysticism of the genius of Blake, should have responded fully to the greatest singer of the faith of democracy.

Mrs. Gilchrist's kindred view of formal creeds, her kindred love and intent of happiness, rendered her peculiarly susceptible to Whitman's poetry. She wrote to William Rossetti a letter of appreciation and admiration of the American poet, which Rossetti sent to Whitman, and afterwards with her consent published in the *Radical* as "An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman."

Whitman replied to Rossetti that he was deeply touched by the sympathies and convictions of Mrs. Gilchrist, "coming from a woman and England," and that he had hitherto received no praise so magnificent as "this smiling *well-done* from the heart and conscience of a true wife and mother."

Whitman was about fifty at this time, a clerk in the Attorney-General's office in Washington; but older in many ways than his annual age would indicate, his health being

broken by his war-time vigils. Already he was "the Good, Gray poet."

When Mrs. Gilchrist first read his poetry I believe she regarded him mainly as a great prophet. Prophet and poet were almost interchangeable terms to the student of Blake. Like the Scotch women who surrounded John Knox, she may have gradually mingled the worship of the prophet's religion with a rising devotion to the prophet as a human being, in her appreciation of Whitman's poetry. Some confusion of feeling a little like this seems to have happened to Mrs. Gilchrist in the next two years, when she suddenly wrote to the inspired author of *Democratic Vistas* (to me, at least, it appears sudden, and one can believe it must have appeared so to Whitman) of her passion for him as a man. Yet it is not quite like the feeling of those other Scotch prophet-lovers, for she had never been in his living presence. The remarkable feature of her letter is that all its emotion is poured forth with the utmost generosity, dignity, and nobility at the feet of her idea of Whitman, of an image purely air-drawn and of the mind. It is like a mid-summer madness, or an autumnal madness, if you will.

Its divine mania descending upon her has none the less completely overcome her with its anguish. But:

Out of its great anguish my love has risen stronger, more triumphant than ever; it cannot doubt, cannot fear, is strong, divine, immortal—This time last year when I seemed dying, I could have no secrets between me and my dear children. I told them of my love: told them all they could rightly understand.

As you read on, in spite of the beauty of her feeling, you cannot help believing her to be the victim of a species of self-hypnotization. She begins by telling Whitman the story of her marriage, to which she was persuaded, she says, by Gilchrist's devotion, and into which she entered without any "faintest gleam of true, tender, wifely love." Though they had a happy and a good life for ten short years, yet "to the last my soul dwelt apart and unmated."

The reader is bewildered. Of course if, as a thoughtful and conscientious girl, she unwisely decided to marry with a soul dwelling apart, she might better have dissembled to the world concerning the nature of her feeling for her husband. But why need she write to Julia Newton that she "loved and was beloved by one who could fulfil her aspirations, and realize her ideal of a true marriage, one who was

altogether, both in intellect and heart, great, noble and beautiful"? Why did she unnecessarily write in her husband's memoir that he had a "heart that gave and took the utmost of happiness in domestic life," and tell her sister-in-law that she longed to be in the Surrey Hills because there her husband's spirit "speaks to me in every sweet scene; broods over the peaceful valleys, haunts the grand, wild, hill-tops, shines forth gloriously in setting sun and moon and stars"? Why did she liken her loss of him to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's loss of his intensely beloved wife of the Sonnets?

It may be suggested that all this was possibly because half-way dissemblings are difficult: and she could dissemble only with wild excellence. But none of her readers will be able to believe that she was ever a dissembler. She was at all times a woman of undoubted sincerity. It seems more probable that she was deeply in love with her husband both before and after her marriage, that she devoted herself to him, and could learn and possess some of his mental qualities afterwards for that very reason. But looking back at her emotion for him, through the mist of this overwhelming later infatuation, she saw it not as it really was, or as it seemed to herself even in his life-time, but as it seemed seen through the veil of her new devotion, which confused her vision not only of the present reality, but of the reality of the past—a passion in which she was no better off than Lysander in his oblivion of ever having loved Hermia.

Whitman seems to realize that her feeling has arisen out of her knowledge not of him, but of his poetry; and in his reply to her, "The Answerer" appears in an excellent light: one of his most attractive aspects as a man of modesty, largeness and good sense. Certainly a "man of the world" could not have improved on the dignity and penetration of his reply; and he shows himself fully worthy of the confidence in which she had written to him: "I know that a woman may without hurt to her pride—without stain or blame—tell her love to thee. I feel for a certainty that she may."

He assures her of his "unmitigated trust and affection"; and that he fully and clearly understands her letter. He writes briefly, because he is sending her his new book of poems. "My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all. In it I have put my body and spirit."

Perhaps Whitman's obsession concerning his works helped him here in wisdom as a man. By this time, indeed, he was hardly a man at all. He was *Leaves of Grass*. To him all thoughts, all passions, all delights, whatever stirs this mortal frame, were ministers of *Leaves of Grass* and fed its sacred flame. It could cause him little surprise, probably, to learn that anyone had been overcome by devotion to his faith.

But it certainly could and did give him pause to learn that a noble English gentlewoman desired to unite her fortune and that of her four children with his daily destiny as "a simple, separate person" in the Attorney-General's office. He is grateful, but dazed; and has all along the sound knowledge that this purpose is simply a wild error and unfounded on reality.

In the passage of the seven years after Mrs. Gilchrist first reads Whitman's poetry, her eldest son is launched on his professional career and on a happy betrothal. Her younger children's education and futures are planned. Whitman is stricken with paralysis. He goes to Camden to end his helpless years. In his misfortune, the beautiful and generous love of his passionate friend desires the more to console him with her presence. Before, he had at times thought he might visit England, when he was convinced all would be clarified between them. But this was now impossible.

At last, in the Autumn of 1876, Mrs. Gilchrist sets sail with her three younger children for Philadelphia. The reader is overwhelmed. Surely here is one of the most remarkable chapters human history holds in the tale of "All for Love, and the World Well Lost." To set out with three children on a journey half around the globe to a broken, impoverished, aging poet she had never seen; to depart from a clematis-veiled cottage and the green ways and life-long friendships of England; to take rare Prints, and beautiful, carved furniture, and Blake's "Elijah in the Fiery Chariot," and transplant them all in a strange continent: this, certainly, is a generous, humble, and uncommon international adventure that is creditable somehow to the human heart, if not to the understanding. One can not help loving Mrs. Gilchrist for her Will to Believe, her nobility, her power of spontaneous action, even though one knows that she is moving on a path of error, of a mistake not

about the greatness of Whitman's nature, but about the possible harmonies of existence. One watches her with the utmost anxiety to know what will happen to her.

What *did happen*?

Here one wanders in the pathless forest of conjecture. The passionate friends, being together, write no letters to each other; and when these begin again, they are indeed devoted and delightful, without other revelation and with no suggestion of passion. In outer circumstance, what occurred was that they met in Philadelphia; and Anne Gilchrist writes to William Rossetti:

Our greatest pleasure is the society of Mr. Whitman, who fully realizes the ideal I had formed from his poems, and brings such an atmosphere of cordiality and geniality with him as is indescribable.

Mrs. Gilchrist remained in America for three years. She took a house on Twenty-second Street, in Philadelphia, where Whitman was constantly with her and her family, coming to tea with them on every evening but Sunday.

Whitman was nearly sixty at this time. We have many a traditional and written account of his majestic appearance, with his silvered hair, his deep, flexible voice, the large dark-blue cape he wore. Of Mrs. Gilchrist's presence he has told us:

Oh! She was strangely different from the average; entirely herself; as simple as nature; true, honest; beautiful as a tree is tall, leafy, rich, full, free—is a tree.

From her son, and from various records of her friends, we learn that she was brown-haired and hazel-eyed, with a "bright and penetrating gaze," and the light, even step of a tireless walker. Mrs. Gilchrist had "an animated manner"; she "charmed persons ordinarily silent to talk in his or her best humour." "Whilst conversing," her son says, "her face became radiant as with an experience of golden years." And Whitman said of her: "The voice indicates the soul. Hers, with its varied modulations and blended tones, was the tenderest, most musical voice ever to bless our ears."

Whitman conducts the family to the theater to see a play of Joaquin Miller's. They all talk and walk in the country around Philadelphia, cross the ferry, and visit their enchanting friend in Camden. The children love him; are indeed "crazy" about him. "Dear, darling Walt," young "Herby" Gilchrist calls him. Beatrice, who enters on a

nurse's training in Massachusetts, writes confiding her struggles and difficulties to him.

Under the blue sky, Whitman used to quote freely, in a full, sweet baritone:

Well, honor is the subject of my story—

and we learn of one especially delightful day near a perfumed clover-field when the air was delicately vibrant with the "low and sulky murmur of the bee," and the Great Companion gossiped about Plutarch and *As You Like It*, and the charm of his hours with American soldiers.

Whitman enjoyed the prints: liked Reynolds' "broad, careless shadows," and read aloud to the family from Tennyson's *Ulysses*, and talked in his characteristic, pleasurable way about all manner of things—"mock radicalism" and Thoreau and George Sand. If any very young persons were present, Whitman always was scrupulous as to their inclusion in the conversation, and always consulted their individual opinions of the subject under discussion. Someone asked him if Bulwer's attitudinizing heroes didn't irritate him. "No. It is part of the fun," he answered.

"Yes," someone will say, "they had a highly attractive, peerless time no doubt. But what about passionate friendships?" That is it. You cannot tell, I think, exactly what happened. But you can guess. My guess is that exactly what Whitman supposed would happen, when Mrs. Gilchrist left the air-drawn path on which her imaginary passion had walked, and entered on the streets of Philadelphia and Camden, did happen. Without being "disappointed" in the poet, she knew at once that such a union as she had been dreaming was unthinkable. Neither, I believe, was it his age that changed the color of her emotion. More probably it was as though she had been envisioning the presence of Jove, and had found the object of her devotion an immortal creature, indeed, but more like Santa Claus. Jupiter and Santa Claus might each be from fifty to sixty years of age, perhaps, in the world's fancy; and letters are filled with allusion to Jove's adventures as a lover; but who will conceive of the delightful patron of Rich Givers in a rôle so out of his part?

There is something in the complete, hardy delight of Whitman's devoted friends in him, something individual and indomitable in a hundred things he said and did, that

leads one to conceive of him—indeed, has obviously led the hearts of many to rise and revel in him—as the species of resistless character known as “a great old boy.” And that, however superb and thoroughly satisfactory a quality, is not of the kind to inspire passionate yearning certainly.

It is impossible indeed to think of Whitman as one much in need of passionate yearning. What he needed was a human element stronger and far rarer—an element which Creation miraculously supplied for him in the personality of Mr. Horace Traubel. He needed someone who could bear in quietude to hear him talk endlessly about alterations in his proof. His nature did not require a cordial, enriched, domestic interior in the companionship of a beautiful and noble-hearted woman among choice engravings and furniture in good taste. It required a scrappy, disordered domestic interior in a dingy frame-house near a switch-track amid the noise of engine-bells and the smoke of factories, and in an atmosphere of war-memories and constant reference to *Leaves of Grass*. Clearly, our greatest poet required the peculiar refreshment to be derived from a habitat *not* in good taste. The social and physical cosmos supplied such a habitat for Whitman; and if he had attempted to live continuously out of it, he would probably have died. But he could not know that he needed, nor could he plan this habitat, any more than a star-fish plans to live on the side of a rock in the sea.

Neither could any English gentlewoman, or, rather, anyone unacquainted with American manhood, be expected to know a thing of this kind about an immortal poet. Whitman had really no means of communicating an essential consideration of this sort; though he makes a sincere attempt in a diffuse, masculine manner, in writing, before Mrs. Gilchrist's departure for the United States:

My dearest friend, I do not approve your American trans-settlement. I see so many things here you have no idea of—the social and almost every other kind of crudeness, meagreness, here (at least in appearance). Don't do anything towards it nor resolve on it, nor make any move at all in it without further advice from me.

Mrs. Gilchrist had a wonderful power of varied enjoyment: after all, she was, before anything else, a dweller on L'Allegro Uplands; and it may be surmised with some reasonableness that when reality transformed her impassioned vision into a totally different episode from that of her pre-

conception, she could say "Good-Bye My Fancy," as wisely and as flexibly as Whitman might himself. Very likely she perceived at once what she might have guessed all along: that people can decide to make a journey or to accomplish almost any other material achievement, and depend to some extent on their own will and energy for the outcome; but that they cannot depend in the least upon their own will and energy as a means of leading them to fall in love. Especially, they cannot choose some unseen figure of genius on another continent to fall in love with, and then absolutely depend upon themselves to do it. This was a unique, heroic plan in the grand style, but founded, one must believe, on an essential misconception.

It seems, however, that unless Mrs. Gilchrist had disregarded Whitman's attempt at indicating something of the kind, unless she had come to America, she never would have been delivered from the spell of her passion. Feeding on itself in England, glutting its sorrow on the morning rose and on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, it might have lasted indefinitely. As it was, it achieved a thoroughly remarkable and apparently satisfactory metamorphosis. She enjoyed her stay deeply: and her friends told her when she returned to England that she looked ten years younger than before her American sojourn.

Her eldest son, whom she left in England, had married happily. During her American absence his son was born.

Finally, after lingering a while in New York, she cannot resist going back to England to see the baby.

Though she writes him from England that she wishes they were all back on Twenty-second Street in Philadelphia, to welcome him home from his trip to Canada, and talk it all over at tea, it is evident that the baby fills her horizon—her "dear little grandson," her "engaging little toddler." She is enthusiastic, too, about verdant England again, and Durham Cathedral. Whitman replies with affectionate hilarity: "How I should indeed like to see that *Cathedral*. I don't know which I should go for first, the Cathedral or *that Baby*."

She is very much occupied, as always, with all her children; and engages now on her *Life of Mary Lamb*. She writes to him rather less often, though she tells him he is in her thoughts as constantly as ever, in spite of the fact that she has been so silent. Wherever they go, the family

think of their beloved friend and imagine him with them. "Won't Walt like sitting in that sunny window?" or "by that cheery, open fire"—or "sauntering on the heath"?

Five years after she sailed from New York, she writes:

I turn many wistful thoughts towards America, and were not I and mine bound here by unseverable ties, did we not seem to grow and belong here by a kind of natural destiny that has to be fulfilled, very cheerfully could I make America my home for the sake of being near you in body as I am in heart and soul—but time has good things in store for us sooner or later, I doubt not.

In the months before Anne Gilchrist's early death, which came unexpectedly in her fifty-eighth year, she had written him again—affectionate letters, fearing for his fortune and comfort, recalling their American days together, their mirth over someone's "dramatic presentation of a negro prayer-meeting," letters looking forward to reading his lovely "after-songs," and telling him of the aspect of the glorious England around her:

What a burst of beauty we have had during the last ten days! We look out just now on a sea of apple and pear blossoms, from the deepest pink to dazzling white, and the tenderest green intermingled with all.

The changing tones of her profound human attachment all sound from L'Allegro Uplands: and, I think, so do those we hear from the Mystic Trumpeter, in the course of this tale of their ways upon earth, whether near each other or far apart.

It is the unjust custom of nearly all idealizers, when they come face to face with an individual reality different from their fancied image, to blame not their own misconception, but the unfortunate subject of their error. But here was a woman who was true enough to truth itself to bear no such unfair grudges; strong-hearted enough to love the individual reality as deeply in an altered fashion, more in the way of a mother perhaps, as she had loved her fancied idol of another kind of devotion.

It is the unjust custom of the idealized, too, when subjected to an altered opinion in a mistaken worshipper, to feel the natural resentment of unreasoning vanity. But Whitman, it appears, was also true enough to truth itself, large enough, genuine enough, not to care about proving an unsuitable idol of romance.

Among the passionate episodes of letters, this seems to

stand out with the effect of an absolute, novel superiority. It has no mean airs of conquest, no biting prides of sex, no injurious humiliations. Compared with it, the performances of "Elle et Lui," of Byron's affairs, and the despite visited by the poet of "A Wasted Vigil" on the inferior nature who could not watch with him, appear as the shrill recriminations, the poor complacencies and rancorous fault-findings, of mere juvenile vanity.

But here, clearly, was a mistake about a passionate friendship in which, however, all came off with a species of magic success—its modulations and its dissonances are delicately harmonized like those of a superb and golden comedy. Everything is full-grown and serene and responsible, and seems creditable on both sides.

Whitman's friends continuously admire and enjoy Mrs. Gilchrist. Mrs. Gilchrist's friends continuously admire and enjoy Whitman. Her son desired to publish her letters to Whitman in his biography of his worshipped mother. But Whitman would not permit this. "Why didn't he destroy them, then?" someone may ask. Who can tell? They had never been an exclusive confidence to him, as her sons knew of them from the beginning. He could have had little impression of them as an exclusive confidence. I believe he failed to destroy them because he seems to have been incapable of destroying any handwriting; and for the same reason for which he kept copies of his own anonymous laudatory comment on his public appearances, and his own anonymous favorable press reviews of his own works.

All one can say about the inconsistent facts of his failure to destroy the letters, and his refusal to permit their publication—a refusal apparently inspired by an impulse of protection towards their writer—is that here, too, the symphony is unfinished. But the reader of his words about Anne Gilchrist will, I am sure, acquit Whitman of any treachery of feeling towards her.

Indeed, it is one of the most interesting qualities of the story that Whitman's delicacy of understanding and conduct characterize it all, and leave one with an odd impression that perhaps a habitat not in good taste offers for the development of staunchness and gentleness in human relations, conditions more favorable than those surrounding Lord Byron or Alfred de Musset.

There is a passage in Mr. Horace Traubel's *Whitman*,

from which it appears that whatever the poet thought of Mrs. Gilchrist's wisdom when it had been untempered by observation and before he had been with her, in the course of their companionship he learned to confide in it completely. He is speaking to Mr. Traubel of his delight in her conversation:

Writing was not the best of her. The best of her was her talk—to hear her perfectly say these things which she has only imperfectly written. I shall never forget—never forget: she is over there now, where you are—eyeing me, overflowing with utterance. She was marvellous above other women in traits in which women are marvellous as a rule—immediate perception, emotion, deep inevitable insight. She had superb judgment—it welled up and out and I only sat off and wondered: welled up from a reservoir of riches, spontaneously, unpremeditatedly. Women are ahead of us in that anyhow—way ahead of us. . . . She was not a blind dreamer—a chaser of fancies: she was concrete—spiritually concrete, I might say: not in the sordid sense of it, but the big, the high.

The readers of the lives of distinguished persons often have cause to repeat Tennyson's complaint of Landseer and to regret that biographical delineation so frequently makes the mistake of having only *one* lion and repeating him in different positions. Each of the lions ought to have a distinct individuality. That happens, fortunately, to be the case with the figures of Whitman and of Anne Gilchrist, as literary history has shown them to us.

The whole composition of their attachment, as their admirers have narrated it to us, shines in light, brilliant yet soft, the autumn tints just beginning to appear,—the air crisp and bracing, yet genial. The uncompleted music of the tale of their ways apart and together seems to tell us, in its gesture and intervals, a fresh story of beauty in human existence.

EDITH WYATT.